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Shuttle explosion probers warned to suspect sabotage

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A former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency yesterday called on the presidential commission investigating the January space shuttle catastrophe to look into the possibility of sabotage.

"The case for foul play is undeniably strong," retired Army Lt. General Daniel O. Graham said in a statement. The general is currently head of the High Frontier, a nonprofit group organized to gain support for a space defense against nuclear missiles.

Mike Weinberg, a spokesman for the presidential commission, declined commment other than to say "the commission will consider all aspects of the matter."

A spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Lane Bonner, said FBI agents were present at Cape Kennedy for the January 28 liftoff as they routinely are for all space launches.

He said "I'm not aware that there's any sabotage investigation underway." Asked if any evidence pointed to sabotage, the spokesman replied "I can't comment on that."

In a telephone interview, Gen. Graham — who was director of the DIA from 1974 to 1976 — said he doubted that sabotage was being investigated "because I know what kind of reaction one gets when you bring up such a possibility. The security people get very nervous."

In the interview, Gen. Graham said he was not making a case for sabotage in the shuttle launch and the failure since then of three NASA rocket boosters. "I'm just saying that you ought to look awfully close at it."

He said "the only choices you have [are] coincidence, a gross drop in efficiency or a third possibility — sabotage."

Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham

The general noted that in recent weeks there had been three failures of normally very reliable space boosters — an Air Force Titan II rocket, which destroyed an important spy satellite; an April 25 misfire of NASA's Nike-Orion, the rocket's first in 55 launches and a more recent failure of the highly reliable NASA Delta rocket.

"The fiery demise of four [including the space shuttle] of our space transportation systems in a row cannot be logically ascribed to 'coincidence,'" Gen. Graham said. Concerning possible mismanagement, he noted both NASA and the Pentagon were involved.

He also noted all four space launch systems had histories of high reliability: the shuttle 100 percent and the others 95 percent.

"The chances of four in a row failing are mathematically astronomical. The case for foul play is undeniably strong," the general said.

Three elements — motivation, capability and vulnerability — should be considered in examining the possibility of sabotage, Gen. Graham said.

On motivation, he said the Soviet KGB would certainly consider sabotage if it thought it would set back the President's Strategic Defense Initiative space defense program by denying American access to space for a year or more. He did not elaborate on how this denial would set back the SDI.

On the space program's vulnerability, the general said it is "inherently great " because of the highly complex machinery and thousands of technicians involved.

"Minor tampering with key components can cause major disasters," he said.

On capability, he said "while motivation is clear, capability is less so, and should be the focus of the investigation."

It would take lower ranking personnel to sabotage space shots than those accused in recent years of stealing spy satellite plans or Navy communications codes, he said.

His suspicions of sabotage were first raised when it was reported that Soviet spy ships, which usually monitor shuttle launches, "were curiously absent at this launch," the general said.

He then wrote the chairman of the presidential commission, former Secretary of State William Rogers, and asked him to look into what he then considered the low possibility of sabotage in order to forestall later speculation such as occurred after the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy.

"If it had been possible to know what was to follow, I would not have been so tentative in my letter to Mr. Rogers," the general said in his statement.

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